RETHINKING THE YEARS AFTER TET

A Book Review by
DALE ANDRADÉ

A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam
by Lewis Sorley
New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999.
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Summing up the situation, "there came a time when the war was won," writes Lewis Sorley in *A Better War*. "The fighting wasn't over, but the war was won." Not by North Vietnam, but by the United States and South Vietnam. With this inimical comment, Sorley fires the first salvo in what is likely to become a contentious debate over the final four years of American military involvement in Vietnam.

Most accounts of Vietnam concentrate largely on the early period of the war, from the introduction of U.S. combat forces in 1965 to the Tet offensive in 1968. *A Better War* picks up in late 1968, after three events dramatically altered the course of the fighting. The first was Tet. While this country-wide series of attacks is usually seen as the beginning of the end for America in Vietnam, it was a military defeat for Hanoi. A shift in the military hierarchy marked the second pivotal event. In June 1968 General William Westmoreland, who had commanded U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) since 1964, turned the job over to his deputy, General Creighton Abrams. The third event was another change in American leadership, the election of Richard Nixon.

Both Nixon and Abrams heralded a different approach to the war. The former came into office with a secret plan to end the conflict and achieve peace with honor. Unlike his predecessor, Nixon was willing to widen the conflict to Laos and Cambodia. This seeming paradox made sense. By attacking enemy sanctuaries South Vietnam would gain breathing room to fight on its own against the North, a process called Vietnamization.

Abrams also brought about important changes on the ground. The conflict had two dimensions from the onset: main force or conventional conflict and the struggle for hearts and minds under the rubric of pacification. Westmoreland approached them separately and stressed the main force conflict. Abrams had a different idea. "I really think that, of all the things, [the pacification program] is the most important. That's where the battle ultimately is won." But Abrams also realized that pacification and Vietnamization could only succeed if conventional units destroyed communist forces or at least kept them at bay. Having watched Westmoreland fail to destroy the enemy with sweeps of the countryside, Abrams cut down the size of operations, concentrating on areas such as the border west of Saigon.

Tet facilitated Abrams's efforts to redirect the war. The attacks across the South in January and February 1968 largely failed. The communists managed to take and hold one city—the old imperial city of Hue. Heavy losses proved the rule, with several main force units annihilated. More important was the near destruction of the Viet Cong infrastructure, a shadow organization crucial to facilitating communist operations in the South. Crippling enemy control of the countryside left a vacuum that could be filled by pacification efforts. Recognizing this development, Abrams stepped up that dimension of the war.

Although Sorley rates the Tet offensive as a failure, the defeat did not represent a total disaster to the communist cause. In fact part of the success of the pacification program must be attributed to a change in Hanoi's strategy rather than Abrams's efforts. A year earlier pacification was difficult with or without Abrams. After Tet, in the spring of 1968, North Vietnam began to field smaller units and temporarily abandoned main force conflict, a shift outlined in a captured enemy document known as "Resolution 9." Sorley portrays that decision as capitulation rather than retrenchment. Far from conceding defeat, however, the document reveals that the communists chose their strategy depending on the circumstances: guerrilla warfare when weak, conventional warfare when strong. And it often used both. Sorley may not recognize this shift, but Abrams surely did as evidenced by a remark which is quoted in *A Better War*. "[The enemy] is a resourceful fellow, and he is an intelligent fellow. And just as he changed from what he'd been doing before to another level . . . he's doing the same thing again." In other words, Hanoi was once again adapting to the situation on the battlefield.

While Sorley's account begins with contending that Abrams pushed North Vietnam up against the wall in the South,

Abrams with Wheeler and McCain in Saigon, 1969.

Naval Historical Center

Dale Andradé is the coauthor of *Spies and Commandos: How America Lost the Secret War in North Vietnam*.

the reality is that some of the largest battles lay ahead. In May 1969 the 101st Airborne Division fought a bloody showdown in the A Shau Valley at a place called Hamburger Hill. A year later American and South Vietnamese forces moved into Cambodia, followed nine months later by a foray against enemy base areas in Laos. Finally, after most American troops had gone home, Hanoi launched the Easter offensive of 1972, resulting in the biggest battle of the war.

With so much fighting yet to come, Sorley's declaration of victory detracts from serious analysis of events and their place in history. If America won, why did Saigon fall? The author calls on old excuses: meddling politicians, misguided media, and an uninformed public. Although there is some truth in that, it is well rehearsed. And a more vital question goes unanswered: what was won? It is difficult to argue that South Vietnam was becoming so strong by 1970 that it could actually have convinced Hanoi to stop fighting and live with the reality of two Vietnams. Yet Sorley asserts Washington could have ensured Saigon's survival by continuing military assistance as promised by Nixon and reinstituting air strikes if North Vietnam violated the Paris Accords of 1973. America's precipitous abandonment of South Vietnam is a sordid story, but one has to ask how air strikes could turn the tide without U.S. advisors on the ground to guide them.

Sorley portrays this better war through the prism of MACV and Abrams. By using messages and recordings not previous available to researchers, he adds much detail to what is known about the conduct of the war's last years. Unfortunately he is so enamored with Abrams that he loses objectivity. Other players appear in black and white: Westmoreland's tenure is dismissed as "the earlier unproductive years" that continued to exert a "malevolent influence," embracing body counts and ignoring pacification. Both are oversimplifications. Although Westmoreland emphasized big-unit warfare, he initiated the pacification program. Sorley largely ignores the fact that Abrams learned much from Westmoreland's mistakes. Had Abrams been the commander in 1965 his legacy might have been different.

Sorley also lambastes Westmoreland for overly optimistic reporting on the war and then cites claims made by the Air Force to have virtually shut down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. He decries statistics as an indicator of success, but applauds the Hamlet Evaluation Survey, a complicated measure of government control of the countryside, as evidence of progress in pacification. Moreover, he fails to mention Speedy Express, a controversial operation that combined body count and statistics. Between December 1968 and May 1969, units of the 9th Infantry Division claimed to have killed some 11,000 Viet Cong, though the Americans recovered only 750 weapons. It was alleged that the division falsified body counts and/or killed innocent civilians, issues that went to the heart of criticisms of the war's conduct.

Despite the image of Abrams in *A Better War* as totally distinct from Westmoreland, the facts appear otherwise. While Abrams played down big search-and-destroy operations, after action reports indicate many similarities. Under both commanders there are reports of Americans surrounding an enemy force, calling in air support and ground reinforcements, and then closing in only to find that most of the enemy had slipped away. It seems logical that the North Vietnamese were not hurt as badly as reported. And lest anyone think that the American toll was lower under Abrams, it bears remembering that over 9,200 died in combat during 1969, more than any other year except 1968.

As for the outcome, even if Sorley is correct about the success of Vietnamization, he disregards the factor of time. It is naive to believe that the military could or should have been allowed to fight indefinitely in an unpopular war. Such is the reality of a democracy. Sorley quotes John Paul Vann, a civilian advisor, who said: "Beyond 1972, the cost of the war will be drastically reduced and will eventually be manageable by the Vietnamese with our logistical and financial assistance." Sorley does not seem to sense any irony in Vann's conclusion that "I think the war will continue indefinitely." This is exactly what Congress and the American people had been debating since 1967. Public opinion would not abide the conflict forever, and even the best case offered by Abrams seemed like forever.

Westmoreland's intelligence officer, General Phillip Davidson, got it right when he wrote in *Vietnam at War*, "We did lose the war. Refusing to accept this defeat, or saying that we won the shooting war, may assuage our bruised egos, but it oversimplifies the conflict and distorts our understanding of its true nature." **JFQ**

THE WORLD WE FEAR

A Book Review by
ALVIN H. BERNSTEIN

Preventive Defense: A New Security Strategy for America
by Ashton B. Carter and William J. Perry
Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1999.
243 pp. $24.95
[ISBN 0–8157–1308–8]

Has the United States developed a set of strategic principles to guide defense and foreign policies in the wake of the Cold War? Some would say not. Yet in a book published just after the demise of the Soviet Union, *A New Concept for National Security*, William Perry, Ashton Carter, and John Steinbruner laid the foundation for what they believed a national strategy should include. Their vision presaged the current administration's policy of liberal internationalism, an approach to the post-Cold War world that revives the Wilsonian principles that dominated liberal thought before the Vietnam era.

This vision contains a strong moral belief in promoting democracy and opposing tyranny. It considers military action more defensible when used in the name of human rights and under the sanction of an international agency than when invoked unilaterally for traditional national interests. (How else does one explain liberal Democrat opposition in Congress to the Persian Gulf War but support for intervention in Kosovo?) It would avoid American unilateralism in a postwar situation when an enemy has been vanquished and no new threats loom on the horizon, because it envisions an opportunity to build multilateral institutions and establish new varieties of international collective security arrangements. Contemporary liberal internationalists anticipate that institutions such as the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe can someday deter aggression, extinguish regional conflagrations, and respond to humanitarian catastrophes.

Most who embrace this vision place great faith in arms control. Some see an opportunity, in a time of apparent global

Alvin H. Bernstein is currently a research professor at the National Defense University.


Secretary Perry in pursuit of mil-to-mil relations.

DOD (Helene C. Stikkel)

peace, to roll back nuclear arsenals, reconfigure conventional forces so that they are largely defensive, internationalize responses to aggression, restrain military outlays, and increase transparency. In *A New Concept for National Security*, the authors noted trends that augured well for such initiatives: the internationalization of economics, the information revolution, increased consensus in international relations, and global environmental constraints. Accordingly, they proposed some first steps: superpower denuclearization, more military-to-military contacts, common warning and intelligence sharing, combined proliferation control regimes, and cooperative regional security arrangements.

Preventive Defense: A New Security Strategy for America, a neatly methodical volume by Ashton Carter and William Perry, appeared precisely as the United States and NATO were slipping into war in the Balkans and the Senate Armed Services Committee held hearings that revealed the extent of Chinese espionage at two highly sensitive U.S. nuclear weapons research laboratories. This coincidence insures that the description provided by the authors of their efforts to reformulate defense policy between February 1994 and January 1997 will not be read as an academic treatise.

This book gives coherence to initiatives that Carter and Perry promoted in the Pentagon and explains the concept of preventive defense, which is intended to replace containment and deterrence. As a strategy, preventive defense envisions three situations that the authors believe require military action in the post Cold War world. At the low end of the spectrum are category C contingencies, so-called humanitarian disasters (such as Haiti, Rwanda, Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo). They do not threaten national survival or interests but require military action because they may undermine regional and international stability. Category B contingencies endanger interests, but not survival. To check them, the Pentagon under Secretaries Aspin, Perry, and Cohen evolved a strategy to deal with simultaneous conflicts in the Persian Gulf and on the Korean peninsula—two contingencies on which the defense budget is estimated. Finally category A threats can imperil national survival, but they have disappeared with the Cold War. To prevent their reemergence, the authors advanced a strategy of preventive defense, which aims—in the jargon of the *Quadrennial Defense Review* (and borrowed from the *Regional Defense Strategy* by Secretary Cheney)—"to shape the strategic environment" to keep it benign.

Carter and Perry dedicate a chapter to five dangers that could, if mismanaged, jeopardize national survival: the emergence of a Weimar Russia, nuclear weapons migrating from the former Soviet Union, the rise of China as a hostile competitor, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and acts of catastrophic terrorism on American soil. They formulate strategies to handle these dangers.

Finally, the authors insist on the need to preserve robust forces that will ensure security if prevention fails. In the last chapter they claim such a force can be maintained with a budget that has cut defense funding by 40 percent and military manpower by a third under President Clinton. They maintain that this level of funding will suffice because of revolutions which the Pentagon is exploiting in three areas: military technology, business practices, and personnel affairs.

The test for judging preventive defense is how well the administration has done executing its precepts. The Clinton administration inherited the most benign security environment since the end of World War II. Nevertheless perils abound. Category B threats could emerge as the very category A threats to survival the strategy of preventive defense is intended to forestall.

On the Korean peninsula, Pyongyang accepts grants of food, oil, and nuclear power plants with barely suppressed hostility. Despite the fact that it is receiving more U.S. aid than any other Asian nation (over $300 million last year), North Korea continues to export missiles to unsavory regimes and move closer to acquiring nuclear capable missiles. Not only was a suspected nuclear site discovered last year, but Pyongyang lobbed a Taepo Dong missile over Japan which caused that country to consider acquiring its own missile defense. Americans may legitimately ask what kind of precedent their largesse is setting for would-be proliferators.

Category creep is also a problem in Europe as Kosovo proves. Through a combination of early indecisiveness and wishful thinking, that humanitarian disaster moved from category C to B, as Balkan stability and preserving NATO credibility drove the Alliance and its U.S. leadership to a bloody intervention which accelerated the very atrocities it aimed to prevent.

As the components of preventive defense reveal their weakness, other key strategic areas bear watching. The solution that authors prefer to prevent a

Weimar Russia recognizes the futility of pouring economic aid into a Russia too chaotic and corrupt to benefit from it. They believe the current military-to-military contacts program, in which NATO and Russian forces train, exercise, and prepare to operate in combat together, can help Moscow establish a place in the post-Cold War world that will satisfy its desire for self-respect. The program will, they claim, prevent divisions and conflicts from breaking out in Europe. It will not. Such military activities may be useful for preventing nuclear weapons and fissile material from getting into the wrong hands. The military-to-military contacts program, however, cannot bear the burden the authors assign it because it will not affect the determinants of whether there will be a Russian backlash or breakdown.

The Russian Federation is falling apart for the same reasons the Soviet Union disintegrated. As the former Soviet republics saw no benefit in supporting a central government too corrupt and ineffective to help them with their own domestic problems, so the regions now seek independence from a federal center irrelevant to their economic recovery. Russia in the 1910s is a better analogy than Weimar Germany for what materialized in the Balkans, because Moscow seemed to regress to its old disastrous role as defender of the Serbs, and the Russian military, with or without contact, cared more for its pride than for the lessons the contacts program provided.

Carter and Perry depend on the Nunn-Lugar cooperative threat reduction program to reduce the numbers and control the movement of nuclear weapons. They reproach Congress for not providing further funding for this program. Yet Congress has extended the legislation to cover the destruction of biological and chemical as well as nuclear weapons. By mid-1998 Nunn-Lugar had provided $2.4 billion in funding, yet Russia still has between 25,000 and 50,000 of these weapons in its arsenal, enough highly enriched uranium to build another 40,000 to 80,000, and nothing like the fiscal resources and will to destroy the weapons and store uranium safely. As Congress looks into a bottomless funding pit, it is concerned with how little Russia and Ukraine are doing to make threat reduction truly cooperative. The greatest obstacle to further funding is using fungible American taxpayer dollars to dismantle an aging Soviet arsenal while Moscow spends its rubles on deploying its new SS–27 intercontinental missile.

Thoughtful readers may wonder how two very talented men of integrity could function in an administration that made every defense policy decision with an eye not on the national security but on public opinion polls. To what extent did administration views of defense affairs prevent Carter and Perry from accomplishing what they might otherwise have achieved? How much folly were they able to prevent? What policies were they compelled to support against their better judgment? This book provides no explicit answer so one must read between the lines. The authors are too gentlemanly to produce a kiss-and-tell volume or even an apologia *pro vita sua*. Their service recalls an observation made nearly two millennia ago by the Roman historian Tacitus: "There can be good men even under bad emperors." **JFQ**

BEYOND THE SOLDIER AND THE STATE

A Book Review by
JOSEPH J. COLLINS

Civilian Control of the Military: The Changing Security Environment
by Michael C. Desch
Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
176 pp. $34.95
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In his seminal work, *The Soldier and the State*, Samuel Huntington announced that he was dealing with theory and that "Understanding requires theory; theory requires abstraction; and abstraction requires the simplification and ordering of reality." Few who followed Huntington into this realm attempted to develop a comprehensive treatment of civil-military relations. But now Michael Desch has answered that challenge. With considerable intellectual courage and analytical rigor, he offers a theory of civil-military relations that attempts to explain major aspects of this phenomenon across time and international boundaries.

Desch centers his theory on civilian control of the military. For him, "the best indicator of the state of civilian control is who prevails when civilian and military preferences diverge. If the military does, there is a problem; if the civilians do, there is not." He posits that civilian control is easiest when threats are high and mostly international, hardest when they are primarily domestic. When neither kind predominates, the story is mixed and other factors, such as military doctrine, may strongly influence civilian control of the military.

The body of Desch's complex and tersely written tome covers a vast piece of 20th century history, examining 23 cases by the type and level of threat and whether the threats were internally or externally focused. Wars are for the most part periods of high external threat which favor civilian control. Détente, along with periods such as the post-Cold War era, favor heightened civil-military tensions. Overall, high levels of external

Colonel Joseph J. Collins, USA (Ret.), is a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

DOD (R.D. Ward)

Rank and file in Chile.

threat produce expert governments and militaries focused on the international environment while low external and high domestic threats bring about disunity, civil-military anxieties, and, *in extremis*, military coups. Circumstances where the level of internal and external threats are both low and high are less easily predicted.

In some cases Desch's theory possesses great explanatory power. In others, such as the civil-military friction in Imperial Germany during World War I, it is stretched to the breaking point. In our day many critics of civil-military relations would find it right on the mark. Without a strong external threat, the U.S. military, still emotionally wed to the Powell doctrine, has become oriented on (some would say disillusioned by) military operations other than war and other activities which detract from its core competency, combat operations. At the same time, inexpert civilian leaders have intruded into personnel affairs and recommended changes in traditional policies such as allowing gays in the military. Complicating matters, the Goldwater-Nichols Act has raised the profile of the top military officer. The last three Chairmen have sometimes run aground on political-military issues, which in fact are the only issues they mediate. At the same time, as a study released by the Center for Strategic and International Studies documented, a growing perception gap exists. Many senior NCOs and officers in the field and fleet have the impression that the Joint Chiefs of Staff are too politically correct. Other members of the Armed Forces do not understand why conditions which are so troubling to them—such as readiness problems, OPTEMPO stress, and recruit quality—appear so much rosier to military leaders inside the beltway.

Many readers may reject Desch's emphasis on civil-military harmony. Indeed, Goldwater-Nichols was meant to sharpen military advice and thereby give the Armed Forces an opportunity to be heard on key political-military issues. In *Dereliction of Duty*, H.R. McMaster detailed how the President and Secretary of Defense manipulated a group of acquiescent Joint Chiefs at the outset of the Vietnam War. Compare that experience with Desert Storm and its aftermath. Should the next Chairman resemble Earle Wheeler or Colin Powell? It is obvious that civil-military friction often serves the national interest. To evaluate civil-military relations, one must move beyond measuring military acquiescence to civilian control.

Historians—who usually deplore political science theory and two-by-two matrices—would no doubt set out to demolish some of the 23 cases which Desch presents. Moreover, some of the history on which he bases his predictions has yet to be written. As Andrew Bacevich has argued, Desch's picture of civil-military tranquility during the Cold War is inaccurate.

Moreover, students of comparative politics might object to the fact that Desch's theory pays scant attention to the differences between markedly different types of regimes. It is hard to believe, for example, that civil-military relations in both the People's Republic of China and Great Britain are guided by structural forces that have nothing to do with the official culture, constitutional order, or quality of the political agendas leading those drastically different states.

But the author's theory—which is accurate in so many cases—should not be picked apart. As Huntington advised his readers in *The Soldier and the State*: "One measure of a theory is the degree to which it encompasses and explains all the relevant facts. Another measure, and the more important one, is the degree to which it encompasses and explains those facts better than any other theory." By that latter standard, Desch's book stands as a courageous, definitive work, one that can only be displaced by another work of theory. His critics have their work cut out for them. **JFQ**